

## Manx orthography and language ideology in the Gaelic continuum

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Robert L. Thomson (1989), a distinguished scholar of Manx language and literature, observes that readers and speakers of Irish and Scottish Gaelic are often surprised and even shocked by the appearance of Manx Gaelic in its written form. Manx orthography is indeed very different from the normal written forms of the other two national forms of modern Gaelic, which share a common orthographic system, though not of course a standard written language. That common Gaelic orthographic system is the result of a slow but continuous development which has its roots in the earliest writing in Old Irish in the Latin script, probably as early as the sixth century (Ahlqvist 1994), and so is the result of some one thousand five hundred years of native literary tradition in Gaelic Ireland and Scotland. The Gaelic orthographic system is fundamental to many core value beliefs, or the *language ideology* (Spolsky 2004), of literate speakers in Ireland and Scotland, who see in it a tool uniquely honed to deal with the native language and dialects of Gaeldom and as a symbol of noble heritage. This belief that Gaelic orthography is the only legitimate way to write in the Gaelic languages has not always been universally held even in Gaelic Ireland and Scotland, and some examples will be discussed below, but when challenged, the Gaelic way has always won out. Manx is the exception, yet even in the Isle of Man, the non-Gaelic orthography has never enjoyed total and unambiguous support. Writing in the preface to his English-Manx dictionary Fargher (1979 :vi) says, "My own view, also shared by many respected and authoritative speakers of the language, is that this system is a historical abomination, separating, as it does, Mann from the rest of Gaeldom, and thus destroying the linguistic unity of the Gaels without replacing it with anything better in the way of a truly phonetic orthography." Such statements are also clearly ideologically based, believing that the Manx orthography is a challenge Manx Gaelic's home in the Gaelic continuum.

The existence of a linguistic and cultural *Gaelic continuum* (Ó Baoill 2000) that goes from the north-east of Scotland to the south-west of Ireland, transcending the boundaries of the standard national language of Ireland and proto-standard national Scottish Gaelic, is a phenomenon discussed by many



dialect scholars. How speakers of particular Gaelic dialects feel their own variety to be close to or far from another is a subject of interest and debate in non-academic circles as well, and such discussions often include the Gaelic dialects of the other country as part of their speculation. Such phenomena are not unique to the Gaelic world of course, but are common in all places where different but closely related language varieties are spoken over a wide geographic area. The Gaelic continuum is thus an area of academic enquiry, but one which also holds a place in the popular language ideology, albeit one whose importance has varied through history (McLeod 2004), linking fundamental beliefs about cultural history, language and the role of the written word. In medieval times the social and linguistic life of the Isle of Man was probably not markedly different to many other places in the Gaelic world which had a similar cultural and economic background. It seems, however, to have become quite detached from the activities of the Irish and Scottish literate classes well before the insular written record emerges in the seventeenth century, a time when Irish and Scottish Gaelic themselves started to come under great pressure from English. In this respect, its social history may be similar to that of neighbouring Gaelic speaking populations across the sea in south-western Scotland, in southern and eastern Highland areas and those parts of eastern Ireland that all became isolated from the main body of Gaelic literary production in the same period. However, in the Gaelic heartlands of Ireland and Scotland, such that they were in the seventeenth century and thereafter, and in the Irish colleges in continental Europe, the native orthographic system prevailed. Manx thus became isolated not only geographically from the rest, or remains, of the Gaelic continuum, but also on the intellectual, academic plain.

Manx orthography, like many aspects of Manx Gaelic and its culture, is quite different from what Irish and Scottish Gaelic speakers see as an essential part of their common Gaelic heritage. The Manx language itself, both in its late spoken form and as a revived language, exhibits many features of a contact language. As Nicholas Williams (1994 : 737) states, it is clear that Manx is a kind of Gaelic, but even without discussing its orthographic conventions, it is certainly an unusual sort of Gaelic. It displays a range of linguistic features which are normally only associated with dialects in terminal decline in Ireland and Scotland, but which seem to have been acceptable in Manx at least as far back as the translations of the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Bible in the seventeenth century, and continued into the speech of the last generations who learnt Manx at home from their own parents or grandparents in the twentieth century. Unlike Ireland and Scotland, where revival speakers are provided with clear target language varieties through both institutionalisation and the fact that there are still significant numbers of speakers who were brought up in the language by parents who learnt the language from their own parents in a relatively unbroken tradition, Manx is now in an entirely revived situation where the target variety is, unavoidably, more fluid. This is not to say that there



is no continuity between the revival speech community and earlier speakers of the language. From when Gaelic first emerged as a community language in the Isle of Man, certainly by the fifth century if not before, until the present day, there has never been a time in the island when the language has not been spoken. Manx orthography is an important part of the relationship between the speakers and their language and also part of their beliefs about that language's own identity. Whether or not Manx can be written in a Gaelic script, given its phonetic and grammatical state, or indeed if such a move would be desirable are challenging questions, but ones which are not simply practically but ideologically driven, as in all orthographic debates.

This paper will discuss the place that fluent Manx speakers see for themselves and their language in the context of the Gaelic continuum, and will focus on the practice and ideology of Manx orthography. The number of Manx speakers has been growing very rapidly in the last fifteen years due to a combination of a change in national attitude towards the language and its culture and the way this has been reflected in, or indeed determined by, public policy. This change in public attitude was strongly linked, according to Philip Gawne<sup>1</sup> (2004), to the social and cultural turmoil which affected the Isle of Man in the 1970s and 1980s when nationalist direct action and electoral successes distilled widely felt unease about the decline in the traditional life and loss of identity. The Government, he believes, was a reluctant recruit to the supporters of Manx Gaelic at first, but from the late 1990s has become an unreserved enthusiast. The major part of government investment in promoting the language has been in the education system, detailed by Fiona McArdle (2006), and it is among children of primary school age that the biggest increases in those claiming to speak Manx can be observed. Nevertheless, the numbers of adolescents and adults who are turning to the language increases each year in this newly positive environment. In these circumstances the authority of the small number of very fluent speakers, most of whom learnt the language when it was not so well embraced by the state, must play an important role in determining the attitudes and practices of this burgeoning group of learners and the positions of the establishment on language questions.

The data presented is drawn from a project carried out in the autumn of 2003. A list of the most fluent speakers of Manx was compiled by asking known Manx speakers to name all those who they believed also to be very good speakers. These speakers were approached and asked to do the same. The process continued until nobody came up with new names. A group of ten key informants verified the list, and a total of 55 completely fluent speakers of Manx speakers were thus identified from a group of some 1 688 people who claimed some knowledge of Manx in the 2001 national census. The total

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Gawne, a Manx language speaker and activist is currently the Isle of Man's Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.



population of the country was 76 315 at the time of that census. This was thus a group of speakers who had primarily defined themselves according to their own definitions of a "good speaker". These criteria were investigated as part of the project but cannot be discussed here. All of the speakers were contacted by letter with a short questionnaire containing questions with multiple-choice answers and large spaces for their comments on the issues raised by each of the question headings. The hard copy was accompanied by electronic copies on PC and Mac compatible disk which could be filled out and returned by e-mail. Both the letter and questionnaire were in Manx only, but it was made clear that an English version was available on the disk and that replies would be welcome in any language. 34 full valid questionnaires were returned. These replies formed the basis of the author's Ned Maddrell Lecture, given in the Isle of Man in November 2003, where the data was further discussed with many of the informants and those who had not returned their questionnaires.

### **Manx Orthography**

The Manx translation of the whole Bible dates from the eighteenth century and marks the climax of literary output from the language's classical period. It represents in the main the orthography that is still in use. The following short examples, illustrating the difference between the Gaelic orthography of Ireland and Scotland and that of the Isle of Man, are from John 1 :19, The Witness of John, 'This was the witness of John, when the Jews sent him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you ?"'.

#### **Irish :**

Is í seo an fhianaise a thug Eoin nuair a chuir na hIúdaigh sagairt agus Léivítigh ó Iarúsailéim chuige á fhiafraí de : Cé thusa ?

#### **Scottish Gaelic :**

Is e seo fianais Eòin nuair a chuir na h-Iùdhaich sagartan agus Lèbhithich o Ierusalem, a-chum gum fiosraicheadh iad dheth, Cò thusa ?

#### **Manx :**

As shoh feanish Ean, tra hug ny Hewnyn saggyrtyn as Leviteyn veih Jerusalem dy enaght jeh, Quoi oo hene ?

It is unlikely that a speaker of any of the three languages would have difficulty in understanding that simple text in the other two if read out aloud. The Manx version is clearly different in its appearance. At first it seems to be



simply a rendition of Gaelic by someone who is only literate in English. Although there is some basis to that assumption, it is not so straight forward.

It is believed that Manx was first printed in 1707, in a catechism by Thomas Wilson, Anglican Bishop of Sodor and Man. The orthographic system used later in the Bible is very close to this, and forms the basis of that which is used at present. Wilson's was not, however, the first book prepared for publication. Around 1610 Bishop John Phillips completed a translation of the *Book of Common Prayer*. He used a related but different orthographic system based on his knowledge of English and Welsh orthographies, probably in an attempt to get closer to actual Manx pronunciation. His translation was not actually published until the end of the nineteenth century, and so had limited influence on the development of Manx while it was still widely spoken. Phillips's orthography, although pre-dating both the first printed books and the Bible translation, still may not have been the first orthography used. Nicholas Williams (1998) has shown that Phillips's own Manx vicars did not like the way in which he had written the vowels, in particular. This seems to indicate that they were already used to a different system, almost certainly the one which was reused by Bishop Wilson in the eighteenth century. This poses the intriguing questions of where the Manx Reformed clergy got their orthography, and indeed what had they been reading. The answer to the earlier of these two seems to be Scotland. Williams (1998 :4-5) makes the case that the spelling system may have been introduced to the Isle of Man during the sixteenth century from Galloway in south-western Scotland. Until the seventeenth century Gaelic was spoken in Ayrshire, Carrick and Galloway. According to Meek (2003 :21), the progressive scotticisation of the Gaelic west after the collapse of the quasi-independent Gaelic Lordship of the Isles from 1493 can be traced in the use of Scots-based rather than Gaelic orthography on funerary monuments and in documents, and indeed that Scottish Gaelic written in a spelling system based on Middle and Early Modern Scots was not uncommon in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Meek 1989), something which he describes himself to appear at first to be like "a dreadful aberration from common sense and Gaelic cultural decency" (Meek 2003 :21). He describes this limited period in which Scottish Gaelic was written in this form in some parts of Scotland as a by-product of the re-shaping of Gaelic Scotland by external forces. Williams (1998) points out that not only does the Manx orthography used in the Bible correspond very closely that in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, written between 1512 and 1542, there is some evidence that "Standard Manx" has actually adopted some spellings that are closer to Scottish pronunciation rather than Manx itself, such as *baatey* ('boat', representing the Scottish *bàta*) rather than a spelling such as *baddey* [β↔↗ð∴] which one might expect.

There are many examples of English (or even Scots) based writing being used at various times in Ireland too. The following example is from the



sermons of Hugh McFadden in early nineteenth century Ulster, presented in Ó Labhraí (2001 : 47) :

Tiggeshiv hein ua shin, go gaichemud a lig a leir o lia go leannu, yol a lahar CVIC ceart luas is ákis a nañal shin 's gode deirhis C lin nuar a rachismud in a lahar ?

The fundamental difference between the use of such orthographies in Scotland and Ireland and their use in the Isle of Man is that in Ireland and Scotland they were transitory. The areas in which they were used either became anglicised (or scotticised) to the extent that texts were no longer produced in Gaelic at all, or the literate Gaelic users reverted to the orthodox system.

The Manx orthographic system appears to have entered the Island with the Reformation, and was heavily influenced by writing in that part of Scotland which was also in political, religious and cultural transition. Manx writing, such as we know it, dates from after the Reformation and was intimately linked to that ideology and the political and cultural allegiances that developed from it. Bringing the Word of God to the people in their own language was central theme of the Reformed churches in north-western Europe, and a tradition that was espoused by most of the other protestant denominations which came to play a greater role in large parts of the Gaelic world in later centuries. As Durkacz (1983) and others have shown, the protestant missions in the Gaelic world also often shared the aim of the emerging British state in a desire to anglicise the population in order to advance civilisation and citizenship, and create political stability. Although the story is not a constant one, the Anglican churches, which had a direct link to the state in the Isle of Man, Ireland and for a period in Scotland, were particularly active in promoting this ideology. The use of a Manx orthography based on English or Scots may be thus seen as not only reflecting the clergy's lack of knowledge of Gaelic orthographic conventions but also as part of a language management ideology that intended writing in Manx to be used in a passive capacity, that is to be read and listened to but not to be a medium of creative writing, and as a transition to English literacy. The creation of an orthography for a language that would bring its speakers closer to convergence with the target language of the planners or language managers is a common tool used in planned language attrition around the world, particularly in the Soviet Union where the many languages of the constituent peoples were gradually russified in order to move closer to *soviet unity*. Such policies have recently resumed in the Russian Federation.

That many of those actively studying Manx before the twentieth century also advocated its demise in favour of English often surprises. The Rev. Dr. John Kelly, who produced a grammar and two dictionaries of Manx and had a good knowledge of the other Gaelic languages, wrote the following



unambiguous view about the reasons to study Manx in 1805. It was published first in Kelly (1866), in the introduction to his *Manx-English Dictionary* :

The enlarged minds of the primitive bishops, Wilson and Hildesley...studied it [Manx] with a higher view, - to render it by publication instrumental in removing ignorance, communicating truth, and obtaining a knowledge of English. ...that unity of language [universal use of English] is the surest cement of civil as well of religious establishments. It has long been the policy of France to render her language universal and she has thus acquired more influence than by her arms in the field. Had a similar policy been extended by this country [Britain] to Ireland... many of the evils which have befallen Ireland might have been avoided, and those by which it is at present threatened most probably prevented... By their clergy being obliged to use the Gaelic language in the Highland parishes, the national and political prejudices, which formerly existed so strongly there are entirely removed, and the use of the English language is everywhere gaining ground. And when there shall be only one national language, then only will the union of the Empire be completely established.

### **The new Manx speakers**

Those who seek to revive and develop Manx thus have had to deal with an orthography which was developed within the context of a particular language ideology that separated the language from the literary worlds of Gaelic Ireland and Scotland, and was very probably even designed as part of the process to eliminate the very language itself. Mark Sebba (1998 :12-13) makes the suggestion that "Manx's very un-Gaelic orthography helps to provide it with autonomy from the other Gaelic languages which, though under threat, are in a relatively enviable position in comparison to Manx." He goes on to suggest that had Manx used Gaelic orthography it may have come under pressure and lose its claim to linguistic independence, and that Fargher's desire for linguistic unity might also have spelt the end of the language. Such an argument is hard to sustain as it is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the Gaelic orthographic system and the character of the Gaelic continuum. While Irish and Scottish Gaelic do use the same *system*, they do not share a common standard language at any level in their modern forms. To use Gaelic orthography for Manx would not make it part of Irish or of Scottish Gaelic. Whether or not it should be done at all is firstly a question of language ideology, but also one of practicality. Manx has been written more or less as we currently find it since it was first printed, and possibly before, though the written corpus, even including the Bible, is very small. Given the fragile state the language is still in, the language movement would have to have compelling reasons to make such a radical change, as well as the skills to do it. A further factor in the current



situation is that although the small kernel of fluent speakers have led the way for a few thousand to be learning the language, now that the state apparatus has embraced the language, tens of thousands of island residents now see Manx as part of their linguistic landscape. This means that should there be an open orthographic debate the activists' own views might well only have a marginal influence on the authorities because of what the huge non-Manx speaking majority might see as a change in the visual aesthetics of the language which they have become used to.

It is the changing nature of the role of Manx in broader society that has led the debate about the directions for its future development. The education system being the hub of activity, literacy skills have come to the fore in a way that they was never the case before, having been much more marginal for most Manx speakers for centuries. In response to questions on their own literacy skills in the language, 16 of the 34 most fluent speakers who responded to the questionnaires said that they had some trouble with spelling and grammar. While 24 respondents (71%), a clear majority, said that they generally had no problem in reading Manx, it was perhaps still unexpected that the figure be so low given that these are recognised to be among the most productive speakers. The key to understanding this marginal engagement with the written language is in the way that the majority of contemporary fluent Manx speakers acquired the language. The majority of speakers in the survey (56%) said that it took them more than five years to achieve fluency in the language, a great majority saying that they had learnt by going to weekly classes and by going to weekly social gatherings for conversations. The self-perceived weakness in literacy and the way in which Manx was acquired thus reveal that for a majority of the most fluent speakers the language is seen primarily in the spoken context. All the qualitative information gathered about the quality of Manx spoken by individuals pointed to speech and understanding, with no mention of reading and writing. Nearly all respondents highlighted the fact that they had learnt through speaking :

A typical statement from an informant was "D'ynsee mee y Ghaelg aym trooid co-loayrtys" [I learnt my Manx through conversation.], while another adds, "T'eh rieu doaillee gra my t'ou flaoil ny dyn, agh dod mee cummal co-loayrtys mie dy liooar kuse dy vleintyn er dy henney. Ny yei shen, ta shin ooilley jin foast g'ynsaghey yn chengey." [It is very hard to say if you are fluent or not, but I am able to hold a good conversation for some years already. Having said that, we are all still learning the language.] Conversation, not reading or writing is seen as the key.

Despite most competent Manx users' concern for conversation and their lack of engagement with the written word, feelings can run high on the orthographic question. A series of questions was asked about creating a Gaelic orthography for Manx (Table 1). These were the questions which generated the



most extended written responses and were also the subject of much debate at the public meeting mentioned above.

Table 1. Opinions on a Gaelic Orthography for Manx.

a) Should a Gaelic type of orthography be created for Manx ?			
Yes : 10	No : 12	Not certain : 8	No reply : 4
b) Could the current system and a Gaelic spelling co-exist ?			
Yes : 14	No : 10	Not certain : 5	No reply : 5
c) There would be advantages for the future of Manx in using a Gaelic orthography.			
Agree : 13	Disagree : 3	Not certain : 10	No reply : 8
d) It would be easier to learn and read Irish and Scottish Gaelic if Manx used a Gaelic orthography.			
Agree : 24	Disagree : 3	Not certain : 3	No reply : 4

Table 1 highlights the divided opinion on the issue among the most active Manx users. Acutely aware of the orthography wars which have divided people in Cornwall and Brittany, many respondents were fearful of any major debate on reforming the Manx orthographic system at all, let alone adopting a Gaelic one, for fear of possible ill-feeling among the small speech community. Question (a) did not ask whether the current system should be replaced by a Gaelic system, but whether or not one might be created. The follow-up question (b) asked if two systems could co-exist. Opinion was divided three ways on both counts, although two respondents who were not in favour of creating a Gaelic orthography felt that should there be such a system the current orthography would surely disappear. Only three respondents to question (c) thought that there would be no advantage to having a Gaelic orthography, while a clear majority in question (d) thought that one such advantage would be easier access to Irish and Scottish Gaelic.

Interest in closer contact with Irish and Scottish Gaelic were strong among the majority of respondents, although many expressed the opinion that they believed themselves to be in the minority, as one informant eloquently put it :

Er lhiam nagh vel agh kuse veg dy Ghaelgeyryn ayns Mannin cur monney scansh da'n chooish shoh er yn oyr :

1. nagh vel y chuse smoo gearree ny chengaghyn Gaelgach elley y lhaih ny y ynsaghey ;

2. nagh vel lhaih as screeu feer scanshoil da'n chuse smoo d'ynseydee ayns Mannin. S'treih lhiam nagh vel ad gearree agh dy loayrt y Ghaelg as yn chengey choloayrtyssagh y hoiggal... - Shegin dou cur shoh nagh vel mee coounty mee-hene ny mast'oc, agh shen yn agh ta mee toiggal



y chooish erreish dou v'er loayrt rish ymmodee sleih mychione y chooish shoh ayns bleecantyn chair.

[I do not think that many Gaelic speakers in Mann are interested in this issue because 1) most do not want to read or learn the other Gaelic languages ; 2) reading and writing are not very important to many learners in the Isle of Man. I think it a shame that they only want to speak Manx and pick up the conversation language... - I should say that I do not count myself amongst them, but this is what I observe from years of talking to large numbers of people about this issue.]

Yet, 27 of the 34 claimed some ability to understand Irish and 25 some ability to understand Scottish Gaelic, while small majorities of 18 and 20 respectively believed it a) important for Manx speakers to get a knowledge of Irish and/or Scottish Gaelic and b) that Manx should draw on Irish and Scottish Gaelic to reinforce its Gaelic nature. Many see some potential advantages, but those most in favour of Gaelic orthographic conventions cited a practical or ideological commitment to a form of pan-Gaelicism. One informant used a Gaelic orthography to write :

My va Gaelg jannoo ymmyd jeh ny bun-reillyn lettraghey cheddin myr Gaeilge as Gàidhlig, harragh ee stiagh 'sy 'woaillee' Ghaelgagh – *Ma bha Gaelg deanamh iomad de na bun-reighailean leitreachadh cheadn' mar Gaeilge a's Gàidhlig, thairach i 'sa 'bhuaile' Ghaelgach*

[If Manx were to have the same basic rules for spelling as Irish and Scottish Gaelic, she would be drawn into the Gaelic fold.]

The desire of a number of Manx speakers to bring the language closer into the mainstreams of the Gaelic continuum would not be enough in itself to trigger a change in the general attitudes towards the issue. Only 23 of the 34 informants in this survey actually described themselves as Manx by nationality, while a further three described themselves as Manx and another nationality. Pan-Gaelicism is understandably a component of identity reinforcement for Manx speakers of revived Manx, but when a quarter of the core speech community are not of a Manx background and therefore do not necessarily have family or ethnic roots in the Gaelic world, the argument that the Manx language must re-Gaelicise itself for ideological reasons is more problematic. Only about half of the population of the country are Manx for more than two generations. In such circumstances those in favour of adopting a Gaelic orthography would need to offer salient arguments for the advantages for Manx learners of using such a system that could be justified internally within the Manx language. Such arguments are easily won in the case of Irish and Scottish Gaelic as the orthographic system is not only supported by a huge corpus of written material, as is the case with all literate societies, the written and spoken



word have been interacting intimately for centuries. The Gaelic system is a core tool that guides learners in pronunciation, etymology and grammar. It is very regular yet supple and can be used to write in any dialect or a standard variety. Modern Manx does not have this relationship with that orthography, and the lack of active literacy and interplay of the spoken and written word over the centuries have deepened this. Manx has, as mentioned above, many of the features that are associated with contact languages, including phonetic mixing and convergence. Williams (1994, 1998) has argued that this phenomenon may go back a thousand years into the Norse period. It is certain that contact with English and the convergence strategies of the language managers of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries increased this trend. As a result, many of the grammatical and phonetic features of Irish and Scottish Gaelic which are embedded in the Gaelic orthographic system are no longer central to Manx. Even if the potential for disagreement among the most active members of the speech community were to be overcome, and the majority of the Manx population won over to the need for a change, there would still be many difficulties to be overcome for Manx to adopt a Gaelic orthography. The biggest of all of these is the lack of expertise to create a Manx version of Gaelic orthography that would be an improvement on the current system from the perspective of Manx itself. It is not possible simply to start writing Manx as if it was Scottish or Irish Gaelic. It would need its own conventions. It would not be impossible to define these, but such work would require a research team, professional training over several years, and would after that be time and resource consuming in itself. All of this would be without any certainty of agreement before such Manx Gaelic orthographic conventions could be published. Currently there are not enough experts in Manx to develop such a system, nor is there a clear majority who would be willing to subscribe to its implementation. Manx speakers in the twenty-first century clearly no longer share the language ideology that was both part of the creation of their writing system and the language's near fatal decline. The Manx orthographic system has many detractors and few outright supporters among the most fluent speakers. The majority are resigned to the fact that things are as they found them when they came to Manx, and they will try to do the best that they can with the system, while lamenting the fact that it is so. A common theme throughout this research was the belief of Manx speakers that building the speech community is more important than any other question about the nature of the Manx being revived, including its orthographic conventions. The speech community believes that it is growing and that all these debates will be more informed and more constructive when there are more speakers.



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